

Refighting the Last War



Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template

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PHOTOS: My Tho, Vietnam, 5 April 1968. (NARA)

A Soldier covers an injured comrade as a helicopter lands to evacuate the wounded after their armored vehicle hit an improvised explosive device in the Tangi Valley of Afghanistan's Wardak Province, 19 August 2009. (AP Photo, David Goldman)

IT IS AN oft-cited maxim that in all the conflicts of the past century, the United States has refought its last war. A number of analysts and journalists have mentioned the war in Vietnam recently in connection with Afghanistan.¹ Perhaps fearful of taking this analogy too far, most have backed away from it. They should not—the Vietnam War is less a metaphor for the conflict in Afghanistan than it is a template. For eight years, the United States has engaged in an almost exact political and military reenactment of the Vietnam War, and the lack of self-awareness of the repetition of events 50 years ago is deeply disturbing.

The Obama Administration deliberately took ownership of the Afghanistan war in its first days in office by sending more troops and ordering multiple strategic reviews. In October, as this article is being written, the Obama Administration is engaged in a very public strategic review following both a grim assessment from the President's hand picked theatre commander, General Stanley McChrystal, and an embarrassing election fiasco in Afghanistan. President Obama certainly knows, as Presidents Johnson and Nixon did in similar circumstances, that the choice of alternatives now is between bad and worse. There is general agreement today, as indeed there was before the Diem Coup in 1963, that the war is going badly. Attacks of all types in Afghanistan have increased each year since 2003 and are up dramatically in 2009, the deadliest year yet for American forces. The Kabul government is so corrupt, dysfunctional, and incompetent that even its election rigging is buffoonish. The U.S. troop commitment has escalated steadily, a pattern familiar from the Vietnam War, and now the President must contemplate a request for another 40,000 U.S. troops or, in the words of General McChrystal's classified assessment leaked to the

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE DEC 2009		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-11-2009 to 00-12-2009	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Refighting the Last War: Afghanistan and the Vietnam Template			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
			5b. GRANT NUMBER		
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
			5e. TASK NUMBER		
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army Combined Arms Center,Fort Leavenworth,KS,66027			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 13	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			



U.S. Army

A CH-47 Chinook helicopter lifts off a slingload of ammunition from fire support base Myron in Cambodia, 24 June 1970.

Washington Post, face “mission failure.”² Whatever the outcomes of the President’s decision and the current Afghan election in the next few weeks, however, they will not affect the extraordinary similarity of the two conflicts.

The superficial parallels between the Afghanistan and Vietnam conflicts are eerie enough. Both insurgencies were and are rurally based. In both cases, 80 percent of the population was and is rural, with national literacy hovering around 10 percent. Both insurgencies were and are ethnically cohesive and exclusive. In both cases, the insurgents enjoyed safe sanctuary behind a long, rugged and uncrossable border, which conventional U.S. forces could not and cannot cross, where the enemy had and has uncontested political power. Both countries were wracked by decades of European imperial aggression (France, the Soviet Union), both improbably won their David-versus-Goliath wars against the invaders, and both experienced a decade of North-South civil war afterwards: all producing generations of experienced and highly skilled fighters and combat commanders.

Both countries have spectacularly inhospitable and impassable terrain and few roads, limiting the value of U.S. superiority in motor vehicles and making tanks irrelevant and artillery immobile. Such terrain forces a reliance on airpower for fire support and helicopters for personnel movement and resupply. Both wars are on the Asian landmass, thousands of miles from the United States, which requires super-attenuated logistics lines, although in Afghanistan, unlike Vietnam, where the U.S. Navy performed extremely well, there is of course no

Cam Rahn Bay, no Mekong Delta, and no coastline, largely limiting the huge advantage of U.S. naval power to SEALs and Seabees.

As in most rural peasant insurgencies, in both cases, poorly equipped guerrillas lived and hid among the people. Neither the Viet Cong (VC) nor the Taliban were or are popular. Support for either to be the national rulers was and is below 15 percent.³ In both wars the enemy deeply infiltrated our bases, and forced interpreters to inform them of our every move and word.⁴ In both countries, heavy-handed and culturally offensive U.S. troop behavior and indiscriminate use of fire support turned rural villages into enemy recruiting centers. North Vietnam received money, weapons and support from the Soviet Union; the Taliban receives it from the Pakistani Army (the ISI) and wealthy Saudis. In June 2009, the U.S. Army even reinstituted the “body count” as a metric of success.⁵ (General McChrystal revoked this on taking command, but the mentality remains.)

Those are just a few of the surface symmetries. The real parallels are far more profound. There are differences, to be sure, but most, if examined, are more atmospheric than structural. And unfortunately, most are distinct *disadvantages* for the United States. Afghanistan is a patchwork of ethnic groups, unlike Vietnam, with almost no national sense of identity or nationalism. In Vietnam, the United States had complete control over the prosecution of the war; in Afghanistan, the “war by coalition” is hampered by fractured internal lines of authority and national caveats and rules of engagement that undermine unity of command. In Vietnam, the enemy was monolithic; the insurgency in Afghanistan is a complex network of networks, and that is bad news.⁶ Afghanistan is not one insurgency but several connected ones, and generalizations about U.S. enemies in Afghanistan are misleading and often counterproductive.

It is here, in the *nature* of the enemy, that the similarities begin to become far more troubling, not in their motivations, which are clearly different, but in our persistent institutional *misreading* of their motivations. In Vietnam, an intense and pervasive narrative of nationalism and reunification motivated the enemy, but the United States obtusely insisted on casting the war as a fight against the spread of communism. However, the North Vietnamese Army

(NVA) and the Viet Cong (VC) were not fighting for communism. They were fighting for Vietnam. *We were fighting against communism, but the enemy wasn't fighting for it.* Similarly, in Afghanistan, the enemy has created a pervasive national discourse, in this case of religious *jihads*. Senior U.S. and NATO officials, however, continue to misread the fundamental narrative of the enemy they are fighting, determined in this case to wage a *secular* campaign against an enemy who is fighting a religious war. The motivations of many individual foot soldiers are baser, of course, ranging from revenge to criminal to simply mercenary, but that is irrelevant. The enemy has succeeded in establishing *jihads* as their pervasive, overarching narrative. Consistently over time and space, all of their remarkably sophisticated information operations uniformly hammer home this religious message of *jihads*. Virtually all Taliban leaders, from senior military and political leaders down to sub-commanders at the district level, are *mullahs*.⁷ The implications of this have not yet sunk in. We are fighting a counterinsurgency; the enemy is fighting a *jihads*. But the intersection of how insurgencies end and how *jihads* end is historically nil, and talk of “negotiating with the Taliban” to find a political solution, as if the Taliban were some sort of unified secular political organization, is profoundly naive. You cannot negotiate with God’s divine will, and in Afghanistan you only seek negotiations when you’re losing in order to get better surrender terms. By misunderstanding the basic nature of the enemy, the United States is fighting the wrong war again, just as we did in Vietnam. It is hard to defeat an enemy you do not understand.

This problem would be fixable if the U.S. political and military apparatus could examine the enemy outside of the pervasively secular discourse created by the dominant U.S. intelligence agencies and without fear of being seen as waging a “war on Islam.” This shift in thinking is difficult, but possible. However, the two really profound similarities between the two wars are virtually *unfixable*. The

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first of these is the political problem of *legitimacy*. Indeed, the greatest challenge from North Vietnam then, and the Taliban today, is not combat power but legitimacy.⁸

The *Sine Qua Non* of Counterinsurgency: Legitimacy

“Legitimacy” is a word that is being bandied about a lot recently in Washington. After eight years, pundits, talking heads, and government officials alike have suddenly discovered the “legitimacy of governance issue.” Unfortunately, none of them seems to understand the real one. The issue is not the moral meltdown of President Hamid Karzai over the last six months, nor his presiding over an absurdly (and unnecessarily) rigged election, nor that he is seen as illegitimate afterward by the majority of Afghans. The real issue is that President Karzai was seen as illegitimate *before* the election. The political disaster in August, which the deputy head of UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Peter Galbraith, called a “train wreck,” merely shifted Afghan public perception of Karzai from contempt to scorn. Afghans are famously polite; western opinion polls show only what Afghans think the questioner wants to hear, as their culture demands, not what they actually think.

Why does this matter to the military? Because experts largely agree that a government seen as legitimate by 85 to 90 percent of the population is the *sine qua non* of success against an insurgency. As Kalev Sepp demonstrated statistically, if you don’t have it, you lose.⁹ (This should not be conflated with popularity: having legitimacy to rule is quite distinct from being popular.) Hamid Karzai is now well below 50 percent, and probably closer to 30 percent.

Insurrections are hardly new phenomena in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Previous Afghan leaders have had varying degrees of success in subduing rural religious insurrection. The degree of that success depended on how much of the population viewed the regime as *legitimate* and how much it stayed out of the daily lives of the people. And Afghan history demonstrates conclusively that legitimacy of governance comes exclusively from two immutable sources: *dynastic* (monarchies and tribal patriarchies) and *religious*, or sometimes both.¹¹ These equate to the traditional and religious sources cited by noted sociologist Max Weber.¹²

Unfortunately, the Karzai government owes its only claim to legitimacy to Weber's third source, the legal one (e.g., western-style elections and the rule of law). This has no historical precedent as a basis for legitimizing Afghan rule at all, however, and the notion that the West can apply it to Afghan society like a coat of paint is simply wishful thinking. In essence, the Karzai government is illegitimate *because* it is elected.¹³

An American cannot declare himself king and expect Americans to see him as legitimate: monarchy is not a source of legitimacy of governance in America. Similarly, a man cannot be voted president in Afghanistan and expect Afghans to perceive him as legitimate: democracy is not a source of legitimacy in Afghanistan. And any illusions a minority of Afghans might have had about the workings of democracy since 2001 have been thoroughly dispelled by a dysfunctional parliament and the August election debacle. Elections don't make democracies; democracies make elections.

This problem of illegitimacy is especially acute at the village level of rural Pashtun society, where dynastic and religious authority has been unquestioned for over a thousand years.¹⁴ The widespread perception among Afghans that the Karzai government is illegitimate—*because* it lacks any traditional or religious legitimacy—predates Karzai's August disgrace by five years.

The revisionist camp of Vietnam historians has made the argument that by 1972, U.S. military forces in the field in South Vietnam had succeeded in temporarily halting the North Vietnamese effort to reunite the country by force, despite the huge handicaps imposed on the military by the political parameters of a limited war.¹⁵ This perspective is true in a narrow sense. But as North Vietnamese Colonel Tu famously said to Colonel Harry Summers in Hanoi in 1972, it is also irrelevant. All the military effort was tragically for naught, because politically, in Saigon, there was no *there* there. The completely illegitimate national government never

had the support of the rural population. (It is also sobering to recall that this temporary stalemate was achieved by up to 535,000 U.S. troops—about eight times the number in Afghanistan by the end of 2009, in a country which would fit inside Afghanistan four times with room for a few mountain ranges left over, at a cost of 58,159 American and as many as four million Vietnamese lives.)¹⁶

Eric Bergerud, one of the Vietnam War's best historians, has written that—

The Government of Vietnam (GVN) lacked legitimacy with the rural peasantry, the largest segment of the population...The peasantry perceived the GVN to be aloof, corrupt, and inefficient...South Vietnam's urban elite possessed the outward manifestations of a foreign culture...more importantly, this small group held most of the wealth and power in a poor nation, and the attitude of the ruling elite toward the rural population was, at best, paternalistic and, at worst, predatory.¹⁷

As Jeffrey Record further notes, "the fundamental political obstacle to an enduring American success in Vietnam [was] a politically illegitimate, militarily feckless, and thoroughly corrupted South Vietnamese client regime."¹⁸ Substitute the word "Afghanistan" for the words "South Vietnam" in these quotations and the descriptions apply precisely to today's government in Kabul. Like Afghanistan, South Vietnam at the national level was a massively corrupt collection of self-interested warlords, many of them deeply implicated in the profitable opium trade, with almost nonexistent legitimacy outside the capital city. The purely military gains achieved at such terrible cost in our nation's blood and treasure in Vietnam never came close to exhausting the enemy's manpower pool or his will to fight, and simply could not be sustained politically by a venal and incompetent set of dysfunctional state institutions where self-interest was the order of the day. This is the first of the two deeply profound replications of the Vietnam War in Afghanistan, and one which the U.S. military should consider carefully before putting its full weight behind further escalation.

Nor was Nixon's "Vietnamization" of that conflict or "Afghanization" of this one ever a viable option. As the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in 1954, "Strong

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and stable governments and societies are necessary to support the creation of strong armies.”¹⁹ Vietnam, like Afghanistan, lacked both. In both cases, a politically appointed and promoted officer corps—more motivated by profit or loyalties to patrons than by patriotism—hobbled and hobbles the army.²⁰ The Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), like the Afghan National Army (ANA), was wracked by a high annual attrition rate, which the U.S. Army obscured in both wars by providing misleading statistics referring purely to the numbers of basic recruits trained. The Pentagon continues to put out the (true but irrelevant) figure of 90,000 ANA soldiers “trained and equipped” since May 2002, not mentioning that perhaps 32,000 combat troops remain present for duty today.²¹ Like the ARVN, ANA recruit quality is poor, virtually all are illiterate, readiness is low even by the lenient standards imposed by pressure to show progress, and drug use is a large and growing problem. Behind the smoke and mirrors, the “official” annual desertion rate is down from a high in 2005 of 30 percent to “only” 10 percent, but the AWOL definition hides a lot of the desertion. Reenlistment is below 50 percent, so with five-year contracts, another 12 percent of the force quits every year. With casualties, sickness, etc., 25 percent of the ANA evaporates annually. The Army knows the ANA cannot ever grow larger than 100,000 men, double its present size, because before then annual accession will equal annual losses.²² Projections of a 134,000-man force by 2010 or a 240,000-man ANA in the future are absurd. Another sad parallel is the fact that in both wars, the U.S. military advisory effort was the absolute lowest priority for personnel assignment within the U.S. Army. Since May 2002, the fill-rate for ANA embedded trainers has averaged around 50 percent of identified billets, and most of them have been pulled from noncombat specialties (like medical or logistics) to undergo remedial combat skills training at Fort Riley themselves before being sent to teach combat skills to the ANA. Most

importantly, the ANA and the ARVN both became psychologically crippled by years of watching from the back seat as the Americans took charge of the war, and neither army learned to operate on its own or ever developed the ability to supply itself or hold the gains U.S. troops achieved. The U.S. Army likes to trumpet operations where the ANA “took the lead,” again neglecting to mention that virtually all of these are in the combat-light northern areas, and almost none of them in the combat-intensive south.

In short, absent the highly improbable self-transformation of the Afghan government into a competent, legitimate, and relatively uncorrupt institution in much less time than the South Vietnamese government had and failed to achieve the same feat, identical conditions for political and indigenous army failure will exist in Afghanistan *regardless* of any foreign military success. History also shows decisively that governments sustained on the points of foreign bayonets in Kabul do not long outlive their departures.

The Critical Difference

There is, however, one critical positive difference between Afghanistan and Vietnam—one which might salvage the war if decision makers grasp it. As we have argued, the central task is establishing legitimacy of governance to deny political control to the Taliban. In Afghanistan, as in South Vietnam, at the national level, this is simply impossible in the time available. It is beyond our power to change an entire society. However, in Afghanistan, this critical legitimacy does not have to be national; it can be local. Governance in the rural areas of Afghanistan has historically been decentralized and tribal, and stability has come from a complex, interlocking web of tribal networks.²³ If Western leaders can think outside the box created by the Treaty of Westphalia and embrace non-Western forms of legitimacy, they could possibly reverse the descending trajectory of the war. Instead of focusing energy and resources on building a sand castle at the water’s edge, as we did repeatedly in Saigon after each new coup, we have argued for years that we should focus on rebuilding the traditional local legitimacy of governance in the existing networks of tribal leaders.²⁴ A culturally adept policy would seek to reestablish stability in rural Afghanistan by putting it back the way it was before the Soviets invaded in 1979. This means re-empowering the

U.S. Marine Corps. SGT Freddy G. Cantu



Village elders running for city council hold up numbers as locals cast votes during an election in the Helmand province of Afghanistan. Such elections set up highly counterproductive and destabilizing parallel governance bodies which further erode and undermine the authority and power of the local elders. The real winner of these elections is the Taliban.

village elders as contrasted with the current policy of trying to further marginalize them with local elections (and thus more local illegitimacy). Recent research has demonstrated conclusively that the Community Development Councils set up by the United Nations and the U.S. Agency for International Development in parallel to the tribal system increase instability and conflict, rather than reducing it.²⁵ Reestablishing *local* legitimacy of governance is, in fact, the one remaining chance to pull something resembling our security goals in Afghanistan out of the fatally flawed Bonn Process and the yawning jaws of defeat. The tragedy of Vietnam was that there were no political solutions. The tragedy of Afghanistan is that there is a political solution, but we keep ignoring it in favor of trying to force them to be like us.

The Crossing Axis: Strategic Military Failure

If the parallels stopped there, the analysis would be grim enough. But in Afghanistan, exactly as

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in Vietnam, the political problem of illegitimacy makes a fatal nexus with the military institutional culture of Big Army, and the result is incoherence. And that is the second of the two deeply disturbing structural parallels between the two conflicts.

Since 2002, the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan—at all levels—has been based on an implied strategy of attrition via clearing operations virtually identical to those pursued in Vietnam. In Vietnam, they were dubbed “search and destroy missions;” in Afghanistan they are called “clearing operations” and “compound searches,” but the purpose is the same—to find easily replaced weapons or clear a tiny, arbitrarily chosen patch of worthless ground for a short period, and then turn it over to indigenous security

forces who can’t hold it, and then go do it again somewhere else. The great majority of our most precious resource in Afghanistan, the soldier-hour, has been wasted in this way since January 2002. Not surprisingly, with a troop-per-square mile ratio by the end of this year which will reach 1/32nd of that in Vietnam, it is not working in Afghanistan either. In Afghanistan, as in Vietnam, the enemy’s manpower pool for troops and tactical leaders is *not* his Achilles heel, because, as in Vietnam, the enemy can replace casualties at a far higher rate than we can ever inflict them. For eight years in Afghanistan we have fought *exactly* the way the enemy expected and hoped we would. The Taliban have read Vietnam history, too. (In both wars the Army has badly underestimated the enemy’s intelligence, another tragic parallel.)

As Russell Weigley brilliantly documented, war of attrition is the American Way of War.²⁶ As in Vietnam, a war of attrition in Afghanistan is doomed to failure. General McChrystal is the first American commander since the war began to understand that protecting the people, not chasing illiterate teenage boys with guns around the countryside, is the basic principle of counterinsurgency. Yet four months into his command, little seems to have changed, except for an eight-year overdue order to stop answering the enemy’s prayers by blowing up compounds

For eight years...we have fought exactly the way the enemy expected and hoped we would.

with air strikes to martyr more of the teenage boys. (Which the Germans in Konduz ignored to blow up two tanker trucks recently and killed another 40 or 50 civilians.) War of attrition is still the default position. Watching the war in Afghanistan unfold is still painfully reminiscent of watching the nightly Vietnam War newscasts with their daily reminders of the same “strategy of tactics.” Few old enough to remember the Vietnam War on TV could have watched the footage of Operation Kanjar showing the Vietnam era CH-47 helicopters clattering into Helmand Province with 4,000 Marines aboard in July 2009 to carry out yet another clearing mission without experiencing a sense of déjà vu. Yes, the Marines say this time they are staying to protect the people, but for how many years? Five? Ten?

Senior officers today often repeat the catechisms that “there is no military solution,” and that we cannot “kill or capture” our way to victory in

Afghanistan. Some officers say the Army has gotten better at counterinsurgency in the last five years. Perhaps so, but there’s little evidence coming out of Afghanistan to prove it. Big Army talks the talk of counterinsurgency but still walks the walk of attrition. Last year, for example, an Army Special Forces officer returning from a year of duty in southern Afghanistan told us that although he had pacified his district by building a relationship of trust with the elders, and had the lowest number of IED attacks and ambushes in his province for the past six months, he was rated the lowest of all the officers in his unit for promotion because he had the fewest number of “kills” during his tour of duty. If the U.S. Army’s own counterinsurgency branch promotes on the basis of attrition, it is a safe bet that the 82nd Airborne is not spending the majority of its pre-deployment training period learning to speak Pashto, sip tea properly, and understand *Pashtunwali*. In a revenge-based culture, we’re still kicking in doors, violating Pashtun honor codes by searching compounds and women, and blowing up civilians just as we have been since 2002. To paraphrase John Paul Vann, we haven’t been in Afghanistan for eight years, we’ve been in Afghanistan for one year eight times.²⁷ The Army’s embedded DNA code to “find, fix, and finish the enemy,” the article of faith



NARA

A Marine from 1st Battalion, 3d Marines, moves a Viet Cong suspect to the rear during a search and clear operation held by the battalion 15 miles west of Da Nang Air Base, 1965.



U.S. Marine Corps, LCPL Phillip Elgie

A U.S. Marine Corps sergeant clears a compound during a patrol in Nawa district, Helmand province, Afghanistan, 29 August 2009.

for General Westmoreland in Vietnam (famously called “the Concept”) was, if anything, *reinforced* by the Vietnam experience.²⁸ As in Vietnam, the U.S. Army in Afghanistan is still subconsciously determined to fight the kind of war of maneuver it likes to fight, rather than adapt its tactics to the kind of war it is actually in.

Less than five percent of U.S. forces in Afghanistan today have reconstruction (called “Pacification” in the Vietnam War) as their primary mission, another statistic photocopied from Vietnam. The percentage of personnel assigned to provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) or supporting them is almost exactly the same as the percentage assigned to village pacification efforts like the bungled Operation Sunrise and the Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program in Vietnam. And as in Vietnam, civil affairs missions are the lowest priority for assets like force protection and MRAPs. Since many of the U.S. PRTs in the south were dismembered and rolled together with maneuver forces in 2005, restrictive force protection rules of engagement have meant there have always been enough assets for another compound search, but rarely enough for the “low-priority” inspection of a school construction project in another district. This suggests a military culture long on theory, short on practical execution, and largely amnesiac of its own history.

Ironically, General McChrystal’s new strategy in Afghanistan of pulling out of rural areas to protect the bigger population centers is exactly the one the enemy would choose for us if he could. Afghans living in the larger towns are mostly merchants and small businessmen, and they are the very last citizens, besides the Hazaras, who want to see the Taliban come back into power. The Taliban know the urban garrisons will fall one by one like ripe apples once they control the rural areas and surround them, as they did when they first came to power in 1996. It is the rural people you have to protect most in a rural insurgency, not the townspeople. The Soviets learned this the hard way in Afghanistan from 1979-1989, when they too held all the populations centers and none of the countryside, and were soundly beaten. As Marshal Akhromeyev remarked in 1986, “We control Kabul and the provincial centers, but... we have lost the battle for the Afghan people.”²⁹

Even more ironically, this same critique was essentially published in the Army’s (in)famous Program for the Pacification and Long Term Development of South Vietnam (PROVN) report in 1966, which, as Andrew Krepinevich has documented, was covered up by an Army which wasn’t interested.³⁰

Provincial Déjà Vu

Another identical replication of the Vietnam War in Afghanistan is the tragic mistake of administering the country and prosecuting the war from the provincial level. As Eric Bergerud wrote of the Vietnam War:

Most political initiatives and many of the military efforts aimed at destroying the... insurgency in South Vietnam were either planned or controlled at the province level. American combat divisions normally established their tactical areas of responsibility, and thus the course of their operations, on the basis of provincial boundaries.³¹

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, however, these provincial boundaries were artificial administrative constructs that did not, *and do not today*, correspond to any political reality on the ground. Provincial boundaries in Afghanistan are meaningless, with no correlation to any local identities or power structures. They resemble familiar state, county, provincial and Länder boundaries in the United States, Britain, France and Germany, however, so they were made the fundamental structural basis for military and political effort in Afghanistan.

Pashtun identity is rooted in a level of social organization further down, in the *woleswali* (the district) and the *alagadari* (subdistrict). Few Pashtuns other than the handful of educated urban elites with whom Westerners interact have any sense of identity beyond this level, which is almost entirely clan based. No Pashtun would ever identify himself by his province, where we are attempting to impose external governance. Rural Pashtuns thus have no perceivable political interest in this keystone of international military and political effort in Afghanistan.

One of the most common (and most fatuous) banalities repeated by a post-2001 crop of “security analysts” about the Pashtun tribal areas is that they are “ungoverned spaces.” This is not true. The tribal areas of Afghanistan are *alternatively governed* spaces: they are governed, as they have been for a



NARA

Marines of H Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, move along rice paddy dikes in pursuit of the Viet Cong, 1965.

millennium, by tribal law. Tribal law, implemented by the tribal elders of each clan, resolves some 95 percent of all disputes through the mechanism of the *jirga*, or council.³² When it is operating in the traditional manner, the village mullah is an integral part of the *jirga*, a spiritual advisor who ensures that the outcome conforms to the dictates of Islam, but the elders lead the process.

When it is in equilibrium, rural Afghan society is a triangle of power formed by the tribal elders, the mullahs, and the government.³³ Interestingly, these correspond exactly to Weber's three sources of legitimacy of governance.³⁴ In times of peace and stability, the longest side of the triangle is that of the tribal elders, constituted through the *jirga* system. The next longest, but much shorter side is that of the mullahs. Traditionally and historically, the government side is a microscopic short segment. However, after 30 years of blowback from the Islamization of the Pashtun begun by General Zia in Pakistan and accelerated by the Soviet-Afghan War, the religious side of the triangle has become the longest side.³⁵

Conceptually, what the West has attempted to do in Afghanistan since 2001, enshrined in the fatally flawed Bonn Process, is make the government side of the triangle the longest through the policy of "extending the reach of the central government."³⁶



Ralph Dayton

Members of a 6th Marines "weapons company" crossing an irrigation canal while on patrol in Helmand Province, May 2008.

However, every time a secular central government has attempted this, as did King Amanullah in the 1920s and the communists in the 1970s, it has resulted in a violent, conservative rural revolution led by mullahs and framed in terms of jihad that brought down the government. It is not a coincidence that the current conservative rural insurgency in Afghanistan led by mullahs and framed in terms of jihad has grown stronger and more virulent each year since 2002 when this misguided effort at revolutionary social engineering became U.S. and UN policy.³⁷ "Extending the reach of the central government" is precisely the wrong strategy in Afghanistan because it is exactly what the rural people do *not* want. The level of coercive social change that would be required to actually implement this radical social revolution in Afghanistan is beyond our national means. As Jeffrey Clark observed in his final analysis of what went wrong in Vietnam, "It was simply beyond the capacity

"Extending the reach of the central government" is precisely the wrong strategy in Afghanistan...

of one power to reform and reshape the society of another.”³⁸ “Extending the reach of the central government” is not the solution to the insurgency, it is one of the primary causes.

We understand that reestablishing the tribal system of governance by elders will not be easy. After eight years of doing everything wrong, there are no longer any easy solutions in Afghanistan. This is simply the least bad one. The tribal system has been wounded in many areas of the country, but not fatally in most cases. Hundreds of elders have been killed, others have sought the comparative safety of larger cities. But the Pashtun have no chiefs, no tribal “leaders.” Unlike Iraq, there are no tribal *sheiks*. Jirgas are egalitarian circles of elders in which all men are equal. Thus if the deforming pressure is removed, the traditional balance of the society will gradually rebound in most places. Cultures are inherently resilient and resistant to change. Furthermore, the argument that restoring the tribal system might not be possible in all rural communities is a poor argument for doing it in none of them.

Instead of discarding this “pair of tens” of a legitimate tribal governance and trying to draw an inside straight to a hopelessly corrupt, incompetent and illegitimate national government, the United States should be working to build on this potentially winning hand—before the stakes reach the point where eight years of bad choices make the options of folding and staying in the game equally ruinous, just exactly as they did in Vietnam.

A Way Forward Taken From the Past

Almost all American infantry officers we have interviewed in rural Afghanistan or just returned from rural operations agree that, at the tactical level of war, the United States is trapped in the kind of *Groundhog Day* loop (as in the Bill Murray film) epitomized by the paradigmatic tragedy of Hamburger Hill in Vietnam. Instead of “clear, hold and build,” what the U.S. is doing

can be characterized as: “clear, return to FOB; clear, return to FOB; clear, return to FOB.”

“Clear, hold, and build” is failing in Afghanistan for the same reasons it failed in Vietnam—because it is *sequenced and linear*—i.e., *first*, clear; *then* hold; *then* build. It is obvious to everyone that this is not actually working, because there’s no subsequent holding, and almost no real building in the Pashtun areas. (In fact, the Taliban have burned down schools faster than we could build them since 2002, and because of a lack of on-site quality control mechanisms, much of what we have built since 2002 has already fallen down.) As in Vietnam, the local security forces, which the United States relies on to do the holding, are incapable of doing so and will be for at least a decade. In Vietnam, these were the “RF-PF,” or Ruff-Puffs. In Afghanistan, we’re pinning our hopes on the Afghan National Police, the most universally hated and corrupt organization in the country, or the new “tribal militias” concept, another extraordinarily bad idea. But international forces are the only element that can provide the stable and reliable guarantee of district security necessary to break the *Groundhog Day* loop and enable all three functions—clearing, holding, and building—to take place *simultaneously*.

The best vehicle for this, based on the success of the CORDS program in Vietnam and the chas-



UH-1D helicopters airlift members of the 2nd Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment from the Filhol Rubber Plantation area to a new staging area, during Operation “Wahiwawa,” a search and destroy mission conducted by the 25th Infantry Division, northeast of Cu Chi, 1966.

DOO

***...the PRTs have been irrelevant
at the strategic level of war...***

sis of the provincial reconstruction team (PRT) model in Afghanistan, is to push the PRT structure down to the districts, the level of primary political importance in Afghanistan. The PRT concept has proven itself to function as a *military element*, but the PRTs have been irrelevant at the strategic level of war. Established by Big Army as a token gesture at reconstruction, they are simply too few and far between. Having an average of one PRT in the south and east for every 1.2 million Pashtuns in abject poverty, as the current ratio stands, may provide a valuable experiment in civil-military operations, but is obviously absurd as the platform for meaningful development and security. The primary reason so few American troops are engaged in the most important mission in Afghanistan is that officers get promoted by demonstrating maneuver skills, not carrying out static missions. This kind of institutional mentality is difficult to change, as soldier-scholars from Andrew Krepinevich to John Nagl have pointed out.

But the route to victory in Afghanistan, as the PROVN report indicated about Vietnam, is to change the strategy. The best way to do this, given the number of forces we have to work with, is to leverage our superiority in protecting troops with firepower and supplying them by helicopter to stand up roughly 200 district reconstruction teams (DRTs). There should be one in each district in the south and east, modeled on the PRT civilian military structure—not dabbling with an experimental handful of six or eight such DRTs, which will cause the enemy little trouble and allow him to work out countermeasures. We could leverage our enormous national engineering, logistic, and organizational supremacy to swarm the enemy with hundreds of them nearly simultaneously. The reliable local security thus provided, combined with efforts to reinforce the political primacy of the elders, could begin to allow the reemergence of their traditional and legitimate authority and leadership and create a self-reinforcing spiral of success.

Because ultimately Afghans must take ownership of their war, there will have to be one major change

to the structure of PRTs. At the district level, there must be a very obvious Afghan face on the mission. The international element of security, some 70 or 80 American men and women, should be discreetly at the center of concentric rings of security, with police “security” in the outer ring outside the FOB, and the Afghan National Army in the middle ring inside the FOB providing the visible security. The locals will know the Americans are there, able to call in fire support for the Afghan army (and the local base) if necessary, but serving as the hidden “big stick” of the local forces while they, the local forces, have the confidence to conduct security operations in support of the local tribal leaders. In fact, with a 100-man ANA presence at each, these DRTs can have somewhat fewer American personnel than the existing PRTs. Two hundred DRTs of 80 American personnel each would require roughly 16,000 men and women, about one quarter of the U.S. force in country at the end of 2009, even without the 40,000 more troops General McChrystal has requested. A garrison of 100 ANA troops at each one would require about half of the roughly 32,000 ANA combat soldiers still actually present for duty. Thus, the United States does not have a force *size* problem so much as a force *distribution* problem. The United States does not need more troops in Afghanistan so much as it needs to redistribute some of the tens of thousands of rear area troops to where they can be more usefully employed.

However, the military cannot deploy DRTs alone. Counterinsurgency is axiomatically “ninety percent political and ten percent military.” Successful implementation would require the State Department to begin to take the war in Afghanistan seriously, a tall order. There are currently more Foreign Service officers working in Rome, for example, than there are in southern and eastern Afghanistan. In Vietnam, there were hundreds of Foreign Service officers deployed in country at any given time after 1968. In southern Afghanistan today, there are less than 20. Six hundred to 800 Pashto-speaking State and U.S. Agency for International Development Foreign Service officers distributed among the 200 district reconstruction teams would be commensurate with the level of effort required. In the eight years since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom, only 13 Foreign Service officers have been trained to speak Pashto, and only two of them are apparently in Afghanistan

today, a pathetic counterinsurgency effort by the State Department by any reasonable standard.

We should not link the DRT strategy to the existing Afghanistan National Development Strategy or the Independent Directorate of Local Governance and the National Solidarity Program, whose task is the “establishment and strengthening of local governing structures” such as Community Development Councils. These councils increase conflict and instability and should be terminated.³⁹ The lessons of Vietnam are again written on the wall: pacification programs like Operation Sunrise (the “strategic hamlets” program) failed largely because of centrally directed bureaucratic incompetence and insensitivity to local considerations. The DRTs must drive the local bus, not out-of-touch bureaucrats in Kabul. The strategy must be decentralized, bottom-up security and long-term nation building, based on traditional tribal leadership and legitimacy.

Conclusion

The Vietnam and Afghan wars are remarkably similar at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. Most historians today agree the conflict in Vietnam was inexorably lost because of failure on two deadly, intersecting axes:

- The inability to establish legitimacy of governance which the rural population would prefer as an alternative to the National Liberation Front (NLF) enough to risk their lives for.
- The failure of American troops to protect the people and isolate them from the insurgents by pursuing instead a war of attrition.

The same fatal axes of failure loom before the United States now in Afghanistan, and time is running out. The United States has perhaps the duration of this presidential administration remaining before NATO peels away, the Afghan and American populations grow tired of the U.S. engagement (a process which has already begun), and the Taliban consolidates its jihad into a critical mass as it did in 1996. It is not possible to create a legitimate national government in that time. A ceremonial monarchy would have provided the necessary traditional legitimacy for an elected government in Kabul, but since the Afghan monarchy was eliminated by the U.S. and the U.N. against the express wishes of more than three-quarters of the delegates at the Emergency Loya Jirga in 2002 (the single most foolish act of the war and the Afghan

equivalent of the Diem coup in 1963), the United States must now embrace the *only remaining secular alternative* to the religious legitimacy of the Taliban—the traditional legitimacy of local tribal leadership.

As Andrew Krepinevich noted in *The Army in Vietnam*, counterinsurgency success begins with protecting the people, not conducting search and destroy missions.⁴⁰ But it is the rural people you have to protect. The bureaucratic inertia of staying the political course will result in failure in Afghanistan as it did in Vietnam. The United States can succeed most quickly and most efficiently by solving the second axis of failure, that of isolating the insurgents from the rural populace by creating approximately 200 district reconstruction teams on the proven PRT chassis, one in each district in the south and east where the war is raging.

The district level is the *only* level of personal identity which matters in southern and eastern Afghanistan. By providing steady, reliable, 24/7 security in every district, led by an Afghan National Army component, and protecting the people from the ravages of both the Taliban and the Afghan Police with on-site American mentors and trainers, the traditional social preeminence of tribal elders will gradually reemerge and reestablish itself in most areas. The tribal structure is wounded, but not yet fatally. The rural villages are still full of 50- to 60-year-old men who sat in the jirgas and *salah-mashwarahs* thirty years ago as 20- to 30-year-old men, and they know how it’s supposed to work. Indeed, they *want* it to work, but they need security to make it happen.

As the system gradually comes back into balance, the radical mullahs will return to their rightful places as the religious advisors and spiritual guides for their communities, rather than remain the radical leaders they are now. This is how jihads on the Afghan-Pakistan frontier end. We have to understand the enemy before we can defeat him.

In 1983, Arnold Isaacs summarized the reasons for failure in Vietnam in his history of the final years of the war as follows:

From start to finish, American leaders remained catastrophically ignorant of Vietnamese history, culture, values, motives, and abilities. Misperceiving both its enemy and its ally, and imprisoned in the myopic conviction that sheer military force could

somehow overcome adverse political circumstances, Washington stumbled from one failure to the next in the continuing delusion that success was always just ahead. This ignorance and false hope were mated, in successive administrations, with bureaucratic circumstances that inhibited admission of error and made it always seem safer to keep repeating the same mistakes,

rather than risk the unknown perils of a different policy.⁴¹

One could again substitute the word “Afghan” for “Vietnamese” in Isaac’s assessment and apply it with equal precision to the U.S. effort in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2009. The current dual-pronged strategy of nation building from the nonexistent top down and a default war of attrition is leading us down the same tragic path. **MR**

This article reflects only the views of its authors, not the views of the Naval Postgraduate School, the DOD, the Center for Advanced Defense Studies, or Military Review.

NOTES

1. John Barry and Evan Thomas, “Afghanistan: Obama’s Vietnam,” *Newsweek*, 9 February 2009.

2. *Washington Post*, 21 September 2009.

3. See interview with Vietnam expert Daniel Ellsberg with TRNN, October 25, 2009, <<http://www.askbutwhy.com/2009/10/daniel-ellsberg-comparing-afghanistan.html>>.

4. Based on Thomas H. Johnson interviews with numerous Afghans, journalists, and military analysts in Kandahar City as well as Kandahar Air Field during May and June 2009.

5. See <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124380078921270039.html?mod=rss_whats_news_us>.

6. For example, see: Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (eds.), *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008); Gilles Dorransoro, *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Thomas H. Johnson, “On the Edge of the Big Muddy: The Taliban Resurgence in Afghanistan,” *China and Eurasian Forum Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (2007), 93-129.

7. Authors’ interview of a senior State Department analyst, March 2009, Washington DC.

8. Thomas Barfield, “Political Legitimacy in the Land of the Hindu Kush: Ruling Afghanistan 1500-2010” (manuscript in progress, 2009).

9. Kalev I. Sepp, “Best Practices in Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (May-June 2005), 8-12.

10. For example, see Thomas Barfield, “Political Legitimacy in the Land of the Hindu Kush” or David Edwards, *Before the Taliban: Genealogies of the Afghan Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

11. The elimination of the monarchy under the new Afghan constitution was very likely the single greatest mistake made by the United States and the United Nations after 2001—admittedly a high bar in a full field of contestants. As an unrecoverable strategic error, it is the Afghan equivalent of the CIA-inspired coup against Diem in Vietnam in November 1963. In 2002, three-quarters of the participants in the Emergency Loya Jirga signed a petition to make the late King, Zahir Shah, the interim head of state, an inconvenient show of reverence for the monarchy, which required an extraordinary level of covert shenanigans to subvert. Even a ceremonial monarchy would have provided the critically needed source of traditional legitimacy necessary to stabilize the new government and constitution. The lesson of Japan and its Emperor at the end of World War II was tragically forgotten in the rush to modernity at Bonn; for an excellent review of political legitimacy in Afghanistan, see Thomas Barfield, “Problems of Establishing Legitimacy in Afghanistan,” *Iranian Studies* 37, 2004, 263-69.

12. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*, translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947).

13. For an analysis of the 2004 Afghan Presidential election, see Thomas H. Johnson, “Afghanistan’s Post-Taliban Transition: The State of State-Building after War,” *Central Asian Survey* (March–June 2006) 25 (1–2), 1–26.

14. See generally: Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

15. See Mark Moyer, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (San Francisco: Presidio Press, 1995); Bruce Palmer, *The 25 Year War: America’s Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984).

16. South Vietnam held 67,108 square miles. (Apart from limited covert operations, American ground forces did not make North Vietnam part of the ground battle space due to political limitations.) Afghanistan today has 251,772 square miles.

17. Eric Bergerud, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War In Hau Nghia Province* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1993) 3.

18. Jeffrey Record, “How America’s Own Military Performance in Vietnam Aided and Abetted the “North’s” Victory, *Why the North Won the Vietnam War*, Marc Jason Gilbert, ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 119.

19. Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years, 1941-1960* (University Press of the Pacific, 2005), 379.

20. The Army has cleverly concealed the true ANA manpower numbers from the

public by publishing only the “trained and equipped” number of ANA soldiers—i.e., the total number who ever graduated from the training center throughout the history of the program, and deliberately concealing the “present for duty” number of men still in the ranks on any given day, especially the number of deployable combat troops.

21. Interview with senior U.S. intelligence official. In a speech to the Foreign Relations Council on October 26, 2009, Senator John Kerry (D. Mass) noted that there are “less than 50,000” men in the ANA. According to a 2009 RAND Corporation report, 34 percent of ANA soldiers are serving in non-combat roles. (The Long March, Building an Afghan National Army) 66 percent of 50,000 is 32,000, confirming the official’s estimate.

22. The U.S. Army Center for Lessons Learned calculated this some time ago and has briefed senior U.S. Army officials to this effect. Just paying the annual salaries of the current 50,000-man force alone would cost more than twice the entire national annual budget of Afghanistan.

23. Generally, see Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 2d ed.); Sir Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1958); Mukulika Banerjee, *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the Northwest Frontier* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Sana Haroon, *Frontier of Faith: Islam in the Indo-Afghan Borderland* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); David B. Edwards, *Heroes of the Age: Moral Fault Lines on the Afghan Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). For a similar dynamic in Pakistan, see James W. Spain, *The People of the Khyber: The Pathans of Pakistan* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962).

24. See for example: “All Counterinsurgency is Local,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2008, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan—Afghanistan Frontier,” *International Security*, Spring 2008, no. 4: 41-77, “Terrorism, Insurgency, and Afghanistan,” *Countering Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century. International Perspectives. Volume 2. Combating the Sources & Facilitators*. Edited by: James J. Forest. Praeger Security International, 2007, “Understanding the Taliban and Insurgency in Afghanistan,” *Orbis: A Journal of World Affairs* 51, no. 1, 2006.

25. Jennifer Brick, “The Political Economy of Customary Village Organizations in Afghanistan” <www-test.bu.edu/aia/brick.pdf>.

26. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

27. See: Neil Sheehan, *Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988).

28. Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army in Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 6.

29. Michael Dobbs, *The Afghan Archive: Secret Memos Trace Kremlin’s March to War*, *The Washington Post*, 15 November 1992, p. A1

30. Krepinevich, 6.

31. Bergerud, 1.

32. Carl Robichaud, “Afghanistan’s Three Legal Systems,” *Afghanistan Watch*, 9 January 2007, <www.afghanistanwatch.org/rule_of_law/index.html> (9 June 2007); for an important scholarly statement and analysis of the impact of culture on Afghan law, see Thomas Barfield, “Culture and Custom in Nation-Building: Law in Afghanistan,” *Maine Law Review* 60, no. 2, 2008, 358-73.

33. Thomas Barfield, “Culture and Custom in Nation-Building,” 354-59.

34. Thomas H. Johnson interviews of numerous district and village elders in Kandahar City, August-September 2008.

35. Thomas H. Johnson and M. Chris Mason, “No Sign until the Burst of Fire: Understanding the Pakistan—Afghanistan Frontier,” *International Security*, Spring 2008, no. 4: 70.

36. For problems associated with the Bonn Accords, see Thomas H. Johnson, “Afghanistan’s Post-Taliban Transition: The State of State-Building after War,” *Central Asian Survey* (March–June 2006) 25 (1–2), 1–26.

37. Johnson and Mason, 54-55.

38. Jeffrey J. Clark, *Advice & Support: The Final Years 1965-1973* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1988), 521.

39. Brick.

40. Krepinevich.

41. Arnold Isaacs, *Without Honor, Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 489.